

PALMYRA EXECUTION

DRAWER 9B

WAR ENDOGEN

7/1/2009 085 0426Z

Civil War Episodes

Palmyra Execution

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

committees, because he "belonged to no healthy political organization," it was yet his duty to consider the finances of the nation; and where duty called him to act it was his habit thoroughly to inform himself. He had also been for four years Governor of Ohio, with a general supervision of the finances of that great State. During this time occurred the famous defalcation of Breslin, the State Treasurer. Mr. Chase, as governor, at once took possession of the treasury, and with a master's hand brought order out of chaos, and so satisfactorily to the State that what seemed at first to be a blemish to his administration redounded to its honor. So it would seem that he had had that special training which fitted him for his mighty task. When he met the great bankers of New York he met them not as a stranger, but as one of them, initiated into the mysteries of their craft. It was well. Mr. Chase's achievement was not the flash of genius that bewilders, but the natural result of trained powers.

Allow me a word in another relation. The extracts from the diary and letters of Chase given in this history of Mr. Lincoln are not pleasant reading. But the picture has its relief. They were written chiefly in the weary, waiting year—1861-62. The most effective pages of this history are, perhaps, those relating to McClellan. The grouping of the facts presents a progressive climax that is simply crushing—but is it not reactionary? Is not the emotion it excites one of painful pity for McClellan and something akin to indignation that those in power should have borne so long with him? Remember that Chase was present and saw all—saw the grand army of the Union wasting away in hopeless inactivity; saw it again, led to battle in a desultory way, defeated piecemeal by a foe inferior in numbers; saw it when victorious retreating from its vanquished enemy; meanwhile saw the debt of the nation piling up mountain high, threatening a financial abyss that would engulf all.

The situation was without precedent. No other nation could have borne those loans. For many months Mr. Chase was in daily apprehension of a catastrophe, blasting alike his country and himself. The responsibility was his. Others spent; "he smote the rock"; and yet he was ignored! He felt himself neglected, and chafed as the strong man bound. Perhaps it would have been better had he suffered in silence; and yet perhaps complaint brought relief.

Born to command, a courtier he could not be.

A letter he wrote me of date August 29, 1862, portrays his feelings during the McClellan régime. I close with this extract from it:

Since the coming of General Halleck, I have known no more of the progress of the war than any outsider. I mean so far as influencing it goes. My recommendations had been, before he came in, generally disregarded, and since have been seldom ventured. I did, in one or two conversations, insist on the removal of General McClellan, and the substitution of a more vigorous and energetic and able leader; on the clearing out of the Mississippi; and the expulsion of the rebels from East Tennessee—all which might have been done. But though heard, I was not heeded. I hope for the best. Those who reject my counsels ought to know more than I do. At all events little is now left for me, except to administer as well as I may under existing circumstances the complicated and difficult concerns of my own department.

CINCINNATI,

W. M. Dickson.

Retaliation in Missouri.

THERE are errors in the April installment of the "Life of Lincoln" relative to the part taken by me in the execution of ten rebel guerrillas at Palmyra, Missouri, in October, 1862, in retaliation for the abduction and murder of a Union citizen of that town. With the opinion of Messrs. Nicolay and Hay on what they term "a punishment tenfold as severe as that demanded by the Mosaic law" I need not concern myself. The statement that my action was under the authority of the State of Missouri is an error. The letter of General Curtis quoted to sustain that statement appears (according to a foot-note on page 860 of Vol. XXII. of the "Official Records") never to have been sent; or, if sent, he was afterwards ashamed of its misstatements, for he forwarded to Washington a copy of a letter taking entirely different ground for refusing to treat with the rebel authorities in their investigation of the execution.

The fact is that while I was at the time a brigadier-general of Missouri State troops, I held a commission as colonel of the 2d Missouri Cavalry, a regiment of State militia mustered into the United States service. As such I had been assigned, June 4, 1862, by the department commander, General Schofield, to command the district of North-east Missouri (see Vol. XIII., page 417, of the "Official Records"), and instructed by him to "take the field in person and exterminate the rebel bands" infesting that section. General Schofield expressly enjoined (see Vol. XIII., page 467, of the "Official Records"): "Do not be too moderate in the measure of severity dealt out to them. Carry out General Orders No. 18 and No. 3 thoroughly."

General Order No. 18 (see Vol. XIII., page 402, "Official Records") states that:

Rebel officers and men are returning to their homes, passing stealthily through our lines and endeavoring again to stir up insurrection in various portions of the State where peace has long prevailed, and there still remain among the disaffected who never belonged to the rebel army a few who avail themselves of every opportunity to murder Union soldiers and destroy the property of citizens. . . . The utmost vigilance and energy are enjoined upon all troops of the State in hunting down and destroying these robbers and assassins. When caught in arms engaged in their unlawful warfare they will be shot down upon the spot. All good citizens who desire to live in peace are required to give their assistance to the military authorities in detecting and bringing to punishment the outlaws who infest this State, and those who shelter and give them protection. Those who fail to do their duty in this matter will be regarded and treated as abettors of the criminals.

It will thus be seen that I was acting directly under Federal authority as an officer of the United States Army and in accordance with my official instructions as such. Moreover, the ten guerrillas executed (not one of whom but had committed murder under circumstances of atrocity) were selected from twenty-two who had previously been formally tried by a United States military commission and sentenced to death, so that their death was but hastened by the act of retaliation, the remaining twelve of the twenty-two convicted being soon afterwards shot in pursuance of their sentence by the officers in command at Macon City and Mexico, Mo. Nor was there unseemly haste in thus carrying out the sentence already pronounced against these unfortunate men. Public notice was given that the ten men would be shot unless within ten days the

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abducted Union citizen (Andrew Allsman, seventy years of age and a non-combatant) was returned unharmed to his family. During that period of ten days, my ranking officer, General Lewis Merrill of the regular army, and General Curtis, who had succeeded General Schofield in command of the district of Missouri, September 26, 1862, were fully advised of my action. In a letter to me dated January 22, 1880, referring to an attack on me in the United States Senate relative to this matter, General Merrill wrote as follows:

No notice appears to have been taken of the other executions, and no reflections were ever made that I know of on either General Curtis or myself, though equally responsible with you, and indeed having the greater responsibility, in that we were your superior officers and could have stopped your action had duty allowed it. Both General Curtis and myself had to listen to many heart-rending appeals to take this action, and both uniformly refused. The event showed it would have been weakness and failure of duty to have listened, for the executions practically ended all guerrilla operations in North Missouri, and restored peace to the community to such an extent at least that it was possible thereafter to commit to the civil authorities the trial and punishment of most of the crime which was thereafter perpetrated. Before this the civil authorities were utterly powerless. You have long suffered from falsehood and misapprehension in this matter, and it gives me great pleasure to do what I can to right you, as I know no more tender-hearted soldier than yourself ever lived, and no more painful duty could have been imposed upon you than that involved in the execution of these criminals; but I also know that you never permitted personal pain to swerve you from the plain line and demand of duty, however stern and hard it should be.

Such an investigation of this affair as President Lincoln made before appointing me a brigadier-general (November, 1863) will convince any unbiased inquirer that my action sprang from neither "mistaken zeal" nor "uncontrolled passion," as my present critics infer, but from an imperative sense of duty. Since the issue of the April CENTURY an interview with General Merrill has appeared in the St. Louis "Globe-Democrat" (April 2), in which he relates that he was summoned by telegraph to report to the President, and immediately repairing to Washington, ignorant of the reason for the summons, appeared before President Lincoln at a time when the members of the Cabinet were seated about him. General Merrill then proceeds as follows:

"I was ordered to report to you, Mr. President," I said, after being presented.

"Yes, General. . . . I want to inquire about that shooting in Missouri."

"I can give you a written report in a few minutes that will explain all," I said.

"I don't want anything in writing, General. I want you to tell me the story."

I told it to him as I have to you, with this addition: "I telegraphed you a number of times asking your approval of the order and asking you, Mr. President, to issue the order yourself, but I asked in vain; and as it was a necessity, I took the responsibility. It was my duty, and I have never felt a twinge of conscience that suggested I did other than right to my trust."

The President came up, laid his hand on my shoulder, and said: "Remember, young man, there are some things which should be done which it would not do for superiors to order done."

By his manner I inferred that had he ordered me to do what it was essential for me to do, political complications would have arisen which would have been troublesome. He evidently meant that he justified my course himself, but preferred not saying so, and left me to understand that my judgment was trusted, and to be exercised by me in emergency.

Having thus the indorsement of both the officers who were my immediate superiors, the implied approval of President Lincoln (whose too tender heart forbade ordering retaliation even for the Fort Pillow massacre), and cherishing, as I do, the firm conviction that my action was the means of saving the lives and property of hundreds of loyal men and women, I feel that my act was the performance of a public duty.

John McNeil,

Late Brevet Major-General, U. S. Vols.

St. Louis.

Governor Seymour during the Draft Riots.

IN the April CENTURY, the authors of the "Life of Lincoln" have fallen into a mistake as to the conduct of Governor Seymour during the draft riots, which should be corrected. I saw the audience in the City Hall Park which Governor Seymour addressed on the occasion referred to at page 929. It was not a crowd of rioters. He did not address the rioters at all. The people whom he there addressed were a multitude of persons naturally attracted to the City Hall by the news that the governor of the State, whose arrival was anxiously expected, had actually come. He used in speaking to the multitude the expression that he and Mr. Everett commonly employed in addressing an audience—"My friends." There was no mention in the speech that the draft justified the riots, and I know that the governor used the whole authority which the law gave him to suppress the riots. Nor can it be truly said that he did all he could to embarrass the Government, or to rouse the people against it. On the contrary, he was thanked by the Secretary of War for his active and energetic coöperation in forwarding troops to meet the Confederate forces. Indeed, one embarrassment during the riots was that the city had been completely stripped of uniformed militia, who had been sent forward by Governor Seymour to meet the invading enemy.

New York.

Everett P. Wheeler.

The "Life of Lincoln"—a Correction.

ON page 927 of the April CENTURY the authors of the "Life of Lincoln" speak of Brevet Brigadier-General Alexander S. Diven, one of the provost-marshal generals of New York, as a "War Democrat." Mr. Ausburn Towner writes by way of correction to say that General Diven "was, originally, a 'Free-soil Democrat,' one of that faction of the old Democratic party that, uniting with the 'Free-soil Whigs,' formed the Republican party. He was a member of the State Senate of New York in 1858-59, having been elected such as a Republican and by Republicans, and therefore was one of those who composed the first Republican Senate of that State. He was elected as a Republican and by the Republicans of his district, then the 27th (the Elmira district), to the 37th Congress, 1861-62, leaving his seat to help organize the 107th Regiment, which he commanded until he was appointed to the position named in the 'History.' He can hardly, with truth, be classed as a 'War Democrat,' unless you so class Secretary Chase or any other Republican leader who had been a Democrat."

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December 21, 1937.

Dr. Louis A. Warren, Director,
Lincoln National Life Foundation,
Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Dear Sir:

Dean Frederick S. Jones of this University is writing a paper on the Palmyra incident, and we are wondering whether you have anything in your file to indicate whether a story told about Lincoln which appeared in the Century Magazine for 1889, page 476 was ever denied. This story was in regard to the Palmyra execution of ten rebels during the Civil War.

"...Such an investigation of this affair as President Lincoln made before appointing me a brigadier-general (November, 1863) will convince any unbiased inquirer that my action sprung from neither "mistaken zeal" nor "uncurbed passion," as my present critics infer, but from an imperative sense of duty. Since the issue of the April CENTURY an interview with General Merrill has appeared in the St. Louis "Globe-Democrat" (April 2) in which he relates that he was summoned by telegraph to report to the President, and immediately repairing to Washington, ignorant of the reason for the summons, appeared before President Lincoln at a time when the members of the Cabinet were seated about him. General Merrill then proceeds as follows:

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(Signed) John McNeil
Late Brevet Major-General, U.S. Vols."

Yours very truly,

Anne S. Pratt

Reference Librarian

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